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Bangladesh: Decision to Postpone Election Offers a Second Chance

WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom commends the caretaker government of Bangladesh for postponing the Jan. 22 national election, noting that the election's shortcomings had sparked street violence and imperiled the political future of the world's fourth largest Muslim majority nation.

As a democracy with a vibrant civil society and a constitution that enshrines universal human rights norms, including the freedom of religion or belief, Bangladesh could be a model for other emerging democracies with majority Muslim populations.

But the election was tainted by widespread allegations of unfairness and partiality among election officials. A study by the U.S. National Democratic Institute found 13 million more names on the voter rolls than would be eligible according to Bangladesh's population. Election officials, in spite of repeated urging, had failed to correct the errors, which could have severely biased the results.

There had also been repeated allegations that eligible voters from minority religious communities were excluded from the registration process. In the Commission's view, such concerns are well founded in light of the ethnic and religious violence that attended Bangladesh's last general election, in October 2001.

Representatives of those minorities had told a Commission delegation to Bangladesh last year of severe anti-minority discrimination in such areas as employment, property rights, and access to the legal system, as well as electoral disenfranchisement.

"Bangladesh was far from ready to conduct a free and fair vote," said Felice D. Gaer, who chairs the Commission, a bipartisan, independent federal agency. "The caretaker government should be commended for taking the principled position to take a time-out in order to fix the voter lists. Bangladesh now has a second chance, and the caretaker government must not squander it."

The postponement is just the start of the effort needed to calm the political unrest and safeguard Bangladeshi democracy. International help will be crucial.

The U.S. Government should urge Bangladesh's caretaker government to:

- set a tight deadline of 60-90 days to correct the voter rolls to ensure that extra names are deleted and other voters are not disenfranchised, and to hold a free and fair election;
- establish a bipartisan body to lead the correction process in order to restore Bangladeshis' faith in the democratic process;
- use transparent and numbered ballot boxes, prevent campaign and election-day violence and punish the perpetrators in order to ensure the integrity of the election; and
- take steps to satisfy the requirements of monitors from the European Union, U.S. National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute and election experts from the United Nations, all of whom refused to offer legitimacy to such a severely flawed election.

The election will be key in determining the future of the democracy of 140 million, and the repercussions will be felt throughout the South Asia region and the Islamic world.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has closely followed developments in Bangladesh, which it has put on its Watch List of countries that require intense monitoring for violations of religious freedom.

For more information on the situation, see the Policy Focus on Bangladesh on the Commission's Web site: www.uscifr.gov.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Felice D. Gaer